

Welcome and opening remarks by Regional Director Rowan Gould

Good morning. I'm pleased to be able to welcome you all to the first meeting of the southwest Alaska sea otter recovery team. Each of you, as well as those members of the team who were unable to be here today, is on this team because of the specific knowledge, perspectives, and abilities you bring to this historic effort to address the precipitous decline of southwest Alaska's threatened sea otter population.

It is a daunting challenge, and one that I'm sure none of you approach lightly. It is a challenge, too, that you take up for no reason other than your belief that it needs doing. Recovery team members are not compensated for their service, and I thank each of you for your willingness to participate, although I know you'll each find your own individual rewards in the form of hard and necessary work done well. In particular, I'd like you all to join me in thanking Lloyd Lowry for taking on the additional burdens and responsibilities of serving as Recovery Team Leader.

The sea otter decline in southwest Alaska is unprecedented, and the obstacles we will face along the route to recovery of this population are not even fully known at this time. Therefore, the first steps in the development of the recovery plan must include recommendations for the kind of research that will help us to better identify the threats faced by these otters. It is only with that greater understanding that we will be able to develop management actions that will aid in their recovery.

Given our lingering uncertainties about the threats, and the limitations they place on our ability to draft a quick and comprehensive recovery plan, we must face the fact that it is unlikely this population will be de-listed soon. It will probably not happen during the professional careers of any of us assembled here today. It will perhaps not happen during our lifetimes. However, this only underscores the importance of the process we are beginning now. The studies we conduct and the data we collect will serve as the foundation for researchers and managers who will follow after us, and their eventual success will be built upon the things that we do right.

There are important unknowns out there. They affect not only sea otters, but other species in southwest Alaska. Coordination with others who are looking at this problem is a must, and I appreciate that many of you at the meeting are concerned about the habitat needs and the data gaps associated with many of these species.

The future of the southwest Alaska population of sea otters begins here today, with all of you. And though it is an uncertain future, I don't believe it could be in more capable hands. We truly appreciate the recommendations you will provide to the Service.

Thank you.